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# Academy language programs form 'on-ramp' for cross-culturally competent leaders

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4/2/2010 - **WASHINGTON (AFNS)** -- The future of the Air Force's culture and language initiatives looks much like a classroom of energized cadets fully engaged in a Chinese language course at the U.S. Air Force Academy, participating and responding to Hanning Hughes' high energy, expressive body language and animated facial expressions.

"When (Ms. Hughes) leaves the classroom, a swarm of eager students follows her to continue asking questions," said retired Brig. Gen. Gunther Mueller, the foreign language adviser to the Air Force Culture and Language Center. "It's every teacher's dream."

Ms. Hughes began teaching at the Air Force Academy in 1995. Active engagement, learner-centered teaching and production at all levels of language and culture education are the centerpieces of her classroom and the language program's cornerstones.

Air Force officials codified their strategy to develop future Air Force officers who are trained and equipped with the language and cultural knowledge to influence policies and operations across the globe in the Culture, Region and Language Flight Plan, which was developed in May 2009 and is being implemented Air Force-wide.

They expanded the opportunities for cadets to become cross-culturally competent in 2005. Every cadet now receives exposure to at least two semesters of required foreign language coursework. This exposes cadets to college-level language courses and identifies cadets with an interest in and aptitude for continued language study, said Col. Dan Uribe, permanent professor and head of the Department of Foreign Languages.

Not all cadets will be language-qualified or proficient, but those who have a genuine interest will continue to develop these skills. Mr. Mueller said the way ahead is to encourage and support Airmen who are motivated to learn and maintain language proficiency.

Languages taught at the Academy include French, German, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Arabic, Japanese and Portuguese. Portuguese recently was introduced to the curriculum in recognition of Brazil's status as a major Western Hemisphere power in the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review.

Academy officials have continued to grow the number of foreign language minors, especially those studying "strategic" or "investment" languages, since 2005, Colonel Uribe said. Overall foreign language enrollments almost doubled between Fall 2005 and Fall 2009, with an increase from 1,226 to 2,364 enrollments.

With the language coursework growth have come expanded opportunities for cadets to study and travel abroad. In a typical year, cadets may travel to one of more than 20 countries for periods ranging from 10 days to six weeks.

According to a 2005 report published by the Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program, "Study abroad is one of the major means of producing foreign language speakers and enhancing foreign language learning. In today's world, study abroad is simply essential to the nation's security."

Language and culture immersion and study-abroad programs at the Academy include the Cadet Summer Language Immersion Program, the Olmsted Cultural Immersion Program, the Cadet Semester Study Abroad Program and the Foreign Academy Exchange Program.

As the number of participants increases, the faculty continues to promote the available opportunities to all cadets, including those less likely to pursue such programs, said Col. Dave Larivee, director of the International Programs Office. Instructors work to target cadets who have not expressed interest in such opportunities or whose demanding curricula otherwise preclude participation.

The Academy's language programs are a primary "on-ramp" for the Air Force Culture and Language Center's recently established Language Enabled Airman Program, or LEAP, said Jay Warwick, director of the Air Force Culture and Language Center's Language Department. LEAP will focus on those early-career Airmen most likely to take full advantage of career-long, postgraduate training and immersion opportunities.

"The Air Force has never fully capitalized on the language abilities that cadets have gained through their classroom and in-country experiences once they enter into active duty," Mr. Warwick said. "With LEAP, we hope to drastically change this situation."

Cadet 2nd Class Brandon Odum said language and culture immersions help bridge the gap in culturally complex environments, and Cadet 1st Class Derrick Kline observed that the combined efforts of the Air Force Academy and Air Force Culture and Language Center are already taking hold.

"Things are changing," he said. "The Air Force is moving in a direction where language is useful and where Airmen can work in foreign operating environments."

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